

# Playing to learn

A guide to child-led play and its importance  
for thinking and learning

A publication commissioned by ATL from Di Chilvers



Professional  
development series



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# 1. Introduction

**Young children's natural affinity and intrinsic need to play is a clever and sophisticated resource that is not capitalised upon enough by teachers. There is something wonderful about the way in which children are born to play; the eclectic mix of skills and innate motivation they demonstrate at a very early age, which enables them to discover new things efficiently and access what they want.**

As a result, children are already competent and capable explorers, hypothesisers and seekers of learning and knowledge. What is needed, is for teachers to tune into their existing world of play, hook into their ideas, thoughts and interests and then to use this to teach. In short, children are already on a path of learning, they are already learners. Teachers need to get on this path with them and head in the same direction.

The key to understanding this lies with our knowledge of play, how children learn and develop (child development) and how we support and extend their understanding. This publication will focus on the way in which children's play can lead them, and their teachers, into deeper levels of thinking and learning. It will consider the following important questions:

- what do we mean by child-led play and learning and how will we recognise it?
- how do we identify and articulate the value of this type of play?
- what do we mean by adult-led activities?
- do we understand the connections between children's play, thinking and learning?
- how do we convince others of the power of child-led play for learning and teaching?

ATL's *Early Years* position statement, published in March 2011, acknowledges that children's learning is complex and recognises that,

*Young children are powerful and active learners, already deeply committed to the project of exploring and understanding the world. Learning is complex, is affected by children's prior knowledge and understanding, and is shaped by their interests.*

This is why the position statement stresses the need for those working in the early years to have a 'thorough pedagogic knowledge,' which includes 'teaching through play, structuring interactions between children to support and challenge learning'. Whilst this publication is compact it will have good pedagogical knowledge at its heart, make the links between theory and practice and keep the child at the centre. Throughout there will be opportunities to pause and reflect individually and collectively so that you can develop a shared understanding of the complex philosophy which underpins this aspect of children's play.



# 2. Play, independent thinking and learning

**There is on-going debate about the value of play and it can feel as though the same old issues are repeated but this, at least, keeps the role of play at the forefront of our work with children.**

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In 1929, Susan Isaacs had very similar discussions to ours today about the place of play in children's learning and development. As a psychologist, psychoanalyst and teacher she was very clear that it was, 'through these **play** experiences that the **child's** mind grows'. Now, after 83 years we have the 'hard' evidence, through robust research studies, and modern theories of the crucial nature of play in supporting children's development, thinking and learning.

The wealth of recent research has moved our arguments forward from 1929 and strengthened the case for a play-based curriculum from birth-seven years old. For example, Dweck's (2006) work on children's mindsets has emphasised the role of play in ensuring that children develop a belief in themselves as thinkers and learners. As natural players, children start from a point of intrinsic desire to be involved and motivated in their play. They feel engaged and empowered and through this their confidence and competence as thinkers and learners is established. As this happens, children develop a 'growth mindset' which underpins and extends their capacity for learning; ensuring that their attitudes and dispositions to further challenges are valued and supported. These are the crucial skills that children need to have in order to become effective learners for life.

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**As natural players, children start from a point of intrinsic desire to be involved and motivated in their play**

Dweck also identified the impact on children's learning of having a 'fixed mindset'. In this case children are passive and have no active engagement in their learning. They have quickly learned that others will tell them what to do and there is always a right answer, which will ultimately lead to a lack of confidence, courage and inclination to take a leap and try it for themselves. Children with a 'fixed mindset' 'see learning as a risky business' and 'have in effect set their own limits'(DCSF, 2010, p.7). Fortunately, a 'fixed mindset' can be turned around by building children's confidence and belief in themselves as learners, though we would not want children to be in this 'zone' in the first place. One of the key ways of achieving this is through play, particularly play which is led by the child.

Linked with children's development of a growth mindset is the development of self-regulation. This disposition is generated through a child's experience of play from an early age. Self-regulation grows from babyhood where children are reliant on their closest adult, usually their mother, to support their attempts at finding out about the world and making their needs known. It is rooted in good attachment, nurturing and attunement and derives from the child being 'regulated' by others (for nourishment, love, support, guidance, communication etc) to the child regulating themselves (being self-sufficient in terms of basic needs, able to decide what to do next and increasing their independence).



Self-regulation encompasses a whole range of crucial 'learnacy' skills which have grown out of the child's experience of play by themselves and with others. It includes children feeling intrinsically motivated to be involved and engaged in an activity, where they seek out challenges and persist at the task even when the going gets tough. It is where children will use a range of strategies and techniques to explore, find things out and solve problems and feel comfortable to change tack when they need to. In this case, getting it wrong is okay as it is just part of their problem-solving, they don't lose confidence or feel defeated because they got it wrong or it didn't work. As self-regulated thinkers and learners children will be able to plan their next steps and organise their own outcomes. In short, they take responsibility for their own learning.

This is critical for developing children's thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills as well as being the basis for good development in maths, reading and comprehension (Whitebread, 2011). Whitebread shows that children's self-regulation is 'commonly found in child-initiated, playful activities including group problem-solving.' It is through their play that children become self-regulated thinkers and learners and see themselves as successful, capable and competent learners.

Research has shown us that growth mindsets and self-regulation are central to children's development and learning and as such have significant implications for how teachers connect with and support children's progress. Play, particularly child-initiated play, weaves together children's learning and development.

**Whitebread shows that children's self-regulation is 'commonly found in child-initiated, playful activities including group problem-solving'**



#### Reflective questions to consider:

Play has a significant influence on children's development as independent thinkers and learners.

- What opportunities are there for children's play in your school?
- How do you support and extend children's play?
- Are children excited, motivated and involved in their play?
- Do the children have a belief in themselves as thinkers and learners?

Taking time to discuss questions such as these is a good investment and ensures that as a team you are all sharing your thinking and are consistent in your approach with the children and their families. Furthermore, opportunities to discuss philosophy and practice (pedagogy) will raise the quality of your work and build an effective and empowered team.



# 3. Play in the foundation years

**Across the UK, the importance of play has been recognised in early years education. In England, play has an established place in the early years foundation stage starting from the themes and principles where play and exploration are a fundamental commitment in the theme of learning and development.**

It is here that the key role play has in children's learning and development is emphasised,

*"Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and to relate to others."*

(EYFS framework 2014, page 9)

It also states that *"each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity."* (page 9)

The foundation phase in Wales is underpinned by play, with a whole guidance document available entitled, *Play/Active Learning*. It states that:

*Play is an essential ingredient in the curriculum which should be fun and stimulating. Well-planned play helps children to think and make sense of the world around them.*

(Play/Active Learning 2013 update, page 5)

In Wales, the foundation phase framework (2015) states that:

*"For children, play can be (and often is) a very serious business. It needs concentrated attention. If it is about children learning through perseverance, attention to detail and concentration – characteristics usually associated with work. Play is not crucial to the way children become self-aware and the way in which they learn the rules of social behaviour. It is also fundamental to intellectual development."*



Each of these documents validates and maintains the place of play as a right for children and as the main and best way in which they do their thinking and learning. This gives leaders and practitioners a firm starting point and a legitimate reason to place the philosophy of play at the heart of good early years provision and practice. However, this only really effectively happens where leaders and practitioners fully understand the theory of children's play and have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the curriculum and pedagogy as set out in the national guidelines.



### Reflective task 1

How far do you and the people you work with understand the significance of play in the early years curriculum? Looking together at the official guidance on play, discuss what it means to you and what it means for the children. Think about the following questions:

- What do the principles tell you about children's learning and development?
- How do you interpret the principles and put them into practice?
- Can you and others see how the principles are actually interpreted in the practice in your nursery/class?

It is vital that you focus on how children learn, as well as what they learn, and how best to support children's thinking and development so that they become effective life-long learners. If you really know your early years guidance and you have 'unpicked' what this means for you, the children you teach and their families, you will be better able to discuss the philosophy with others and ensure that it is interpreted appropriately and respectfully for all children.



**Well-planned play helps children to think and make sense of the world around them**





# 4. What does play mean to you?

**Defining what we mean by frequently used terminology, clears the fog and helps us to move away from an over use of jargon and really think about what it means for practice. For some individuals working with young children, including those in leadership roles, the terminology can be confusing and open to misinterpretation, especially around play.**

Drawing up the definitive definition of 'play' has been the mission of many eminent people, including Bruce (1987, 1991, 2001, 2006), Moyles (1994, 1989), Broadhead (2004, 2010), Lindon (2001), Wood and Attfield (1996) and Manning and Sharp (1977). This rich play-based philosophy includes:

- the 12 features of play, which combine to create free-flow play (Bruce, 1991)
- the social play continuum (Broadhead, 2004)
- the typology of play (Hughes in Lindon, 2001)
- structured play (Manning and Sharp, 1977).

This would be a good point in the publication to pause and reflect on your understanding of the key terms and their meaning in order to clarify your own thinking and understanding and to ensure that the team you work with is aware of the philosophy that underpins their practice. This is one of the most effective things you can do in order to improve practice and to raise the quality of experience for the children you teach. It will also have a significant impact on your development and that of the wider team by raising confidence, self-awareness and, above all, an understanding of what good early years practice should look like.



## Reflective task 2

Think about the terms 'child-initiated play' and 'child-led play' and write down all the thoughts that come into your head, even those that you think are superficial (they often are not). Share them with your colleagues and look for the common threads across your thinking then 'sort' them into the following headings:

- what this looks like from a child's perspective
- what this looks like from an adult's perspective
- what this looks like for the enabling environment that you provide.

This will give you a clear understanding of why and how you are supporting child-initiated/child-led play; it can be your starting point for further development or an opportunity to re-assess where you are if you are already following children's interests and ideas.



For this publication, there are some very helpful interpretations of the terminology in the National Strategies/DCSF booklet entitled, *Learning, Playing and Interacting – Good practice in the EYFS*, (2009). Table 1 below uses the definitions from *Learning,*

*Playing and Interacting* and unpicks what this might look like in practice. The final column asks you to look for connections in your own practice, a valuable exercise in the self-evaluation of your provision.

*Elements of this table have been adapted from Learning, Playing and Interacting, 2009, (DCSF).*

| Play  |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Definition  | What this looks like in practice   | How does this link to the practice in your setting? |
| <p>Play is freely chosen by, and under the control of, the child. The child decides how to play, how long to sustain the play, what the play is about, and who to play with. There are many forms of play, but it is usually highly creative, open-ended and imaginative. It requires active engagement of the players, and can be deeply satisfying.</p> | <p><b>Children have the opportunity and time to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• play on their own or with others both indoors and outdoors without being directed by an adult</li> <li>• play with a range of open-ended resources imaginatively and create their own ‘stories’/play themes</li> <li>• talk and develop conversations as they play.</li> </ul> <p><b>Adults support children by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding and respecting the role of play in young children’s lives and its connection to their thinking, learning and development</li> <li>• observing and documenting their ideas and thinking, eg photographs, video/flip camera footage, recording talk and conversations</li> <li>• adding to the open-ended resources and enhancing them in response to children’s play</li> <li>• thinking about ways to extend children’s play and use it as a starting point for following children’s interests and planning for adult-led activities.</li> </ul> |   |

**There are many forms of play, but it is usually highly creative, open-ended and imaginative**



## Child-initiated/led play

| Definition   | What this looks like in practice   | How does this link to the practice in your setting? |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Child-initiated activity has many characteristics in common with play, as it is wholly decided upon by the child, based on the child's own motivation, and remains under the child's control. It may involve play of many types, or it may be seen by the child as an activity with a serious purpose to explore a project or express an idea which the child may not see as pure play. It is guided by certain expectations within an early years setting regarding responsible use of space, time and purposes.</p> | <p><b>Children have the opportunity and time to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• follow many of the points from the above section on play</li> <li>• become involved in their interests, share them with others collaboratively and be excited and inspired by their discoveries</li> <li>• submerge themselves in and explore their individual and collective ideas without constant interruption to do other 'more important' activities</li> <li>• reflect on their ideas and interests and return to them as part of their daily and weekly experiences in school</li> <li>• show their deeper levels of learning as part of their flow of thinking</li> <li>• tell others about their interests and ideas including their families</li> <li>• do this both inside and outside, where they can work on a bigger scale</li> <li>• interact with adults who are interested in their child-led ideas and interests.</li> </ul> <p><b>Adults support children by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• following many of the points from the above section on play</li> <li>• observing and recording (documenting) children's interests and ideas over a longer period of time</li> <li>• recognising and understanding what the children are thinking and learning and how they can best support this development through careful intervention and focused activities</li> <li>• avoiding a 'stop-start' routine, where there are constant interruptions to do other things and which result in children having little time to concentrate and become absorbed in their chosen activities. This will not support the development of a 'growth mindset' or 'self-regulation.'</li> </ul> |   |

## Adult-led

| Definition   | What this looks like in practice   | How does this link to the practice in your setting? |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Adult-led activities are those which adults initiate. The activities are not play and children are not likely to see them as play, but they should be playful; open-ended activities presented to children, which have elements of imagination and active exploration that will increase the interest and motivation for children. As well as focussed activities with groups of children, adult-led activities can include greeting times, story times, songs and even tidying up.</p> | <p><b>Children have the opportunity and time to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• see their interests and ideas used as a starting point for adult-led/ focussed activities</li> <li>• engage with supportive adults who are planning activities which are playful eg using songs and rhymes related to interests to introduce letters and sounds and joining in with children’s play to teach a skill or pass on information</li> <li>• feel motivated, enthused and inspired by adult planned activities</li> </ul> <p><b>Adults support children by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understanding why it is important to follow children’s interests and fascinations and how this will lead to positive, well-motivated, deeper levels of thinking and learning</li> <li>• planning adult-led activities which hook into child-led thinking and learning and develop them further</li> <li>• providing children with activities which are exciting and imaginative rather than repetitive and routine</li> <li>• ensuring that there is an appropriate balance across the day and week of adult-led activities and child-led play and learning.</li> </ul> |   |

**Sustained shared thinking involves the adult being aware of children’s interests and understandings and the adult and children working together to develop an idea or skill**





## Sustained shared thinking

| Definition   | What this looks like in practice  | How does this link to the practice in your setting? |
|--|---|---|
| <p>When children explore and share their ideas with others they try to solve problems and develop their thinking together – constructing their own learning. Sustained shared thinking involves the adult being aware of children’s interests and understandings and the adult and children working together to develop an idea or skill.</p> <p>Enabling young children to learn most effectively. This is demonstrated when an adult and a child or two children work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002).</p> | <p><b>Children have the opportunity and time to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• find and explore something they are interested in</li> <li>• play imaginatively indoors and outdoors</li> <li>• talk and have shared/joint conversations</li> <li>• build their thinking and construct new ideas with others (children and/or adults)</li> <li>• become immersed in their ideas, fascinations and interests</li> <li>• reflect on and revisit their ideas and interests.</li> </ul> <p><b>Adults support children by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• careful observation of children’s thinking and documenting this as a process rather than an end product</li> <li>• using appropriate and relevant questioning, demonstrating/ modelling, telling/teaching and dialogue all through a balance of child-initiated and adult-led practice.</li> </ul> |   |



**Different perspectives should show how early years philosophy has many connections with later learning and children's crucial 'learnacy,' attitudes and skills**



**Reflective task 3**

Look back at reflective task 2. Use the same process to consider other key terms such as play, adult-led activities and sustained shared thinking. This is also a valuable task to undertake across teams and key stages (KSs) as the different perspectives should show how early years philosophy has many connections with later learning and children's crucial 'learnacy,' attitudes and skills. For example, think about the connections between 'mind sets' and self-regulation for older children, these are learning dispositions that we would want for all our children.

Ultimately, we need to be clear about the terminology, the underpinning theory and how this relates to children's learning and development so that we can confidently articulate it to others, be they parents, colleagues, headteachers, governors or Ofsted inspectors, in an informed and knowledgeable way. If we can be clear about the values, philosophy and practice of the foundation stage, especially around the issues of child-led play and adult-led activity, we can influence others and reassure parents and colleagues that this will be the most effective way of supporting children's learning.



# 5. Child-led play and adult-led activities

Understanding what child-led play and adult-led activities/support look like in practice is often easier when we view examples and observations of them happening in action. Allan's story below illustrates very well what happens when children follow their ideas and interests, and the interplay between child and adult.

## Allan's story

### The garage

**Allan is in a reception class and has been identified by his teacher as a child who needs further support as he moves towards the transition into KS1. Allan doesn't have a great deal of confidence, has few friendships, is quiet and there are concerns regarding his behaviour. He does have an interest in cars as his father is a mechanic and he often goes to work with his father at the weekends.**

Allan's teacher picked up on his interest in cars and noted the following:

*Allan's father is a mechanic and regularly takes him to work where he enjoys 'fixing things' and making models with car parts. It became clear that Allan enjoyed construction, cars and garages. Initially we provided non-fiction books about cars in the book corner, which they enjoyed looking at and put cars in the small world area with blocks to make a garage. (Allan's teacher has tuned into his child-led interest in cars)*

Allan's teacher has now made the connection with Allan's interest and has provided the time and materials outdoors for him to develop his ideas (at this point the activity is adult-led as the teacher has planned the opportunity and provided the materials). *This is what the teacher observed whilst Allan played 'garages':*

*During outdoor play, Allan and three friends used wooden blocks to make a ramp and rolled a trolley onto it. They said this was the pit and they were fixing a car. (child-led play)*

*In response to this we provided more blocks, bikes and cars, tools, a till, hard hats and a log book which Allan had told me is 'where you write the jobs in'. (adult-led support to extend the children's interest)*

*Allan and his friends (five boys) made the 'pit' again and immediately began playing 'garages'. (Child-led play)*

*During the activity the boys worked as a team, spoke and communicated with each other really well, eg, 'back, back, stop, stop!', 'it needs to be closer together!' (Child-led play)*

*Continued on page 14*

Continued from page 13

*There was some excellent use of vocabulary from Allan, eg, 'there's not enough clearance for that car!', 'we need to wheel-spin it on the ramp!'* (Child-led play)

*The boys took on roles, for instance a customer, the mechanic in the pit, someone to put the oil in, someone to check the wheels etc. Role-play is something this particular group of boys rarely access.* (Child-led play)

*They showed awareness of each other's safety, eg, 'Jack, be careful!'* (when someone was underneath the car). *Allan demonstrated mathematical thinking in his play, when judging sizes and distance and the best way to get the car on the ramp.* (Child-led play)

The boys revisited the garage regularly.

In another example, Allan's interest has moved, though he is still the expert on cars, on to volcanoes as his teacher has picked up on the current news of an erupting volcano in Iceland.

### **Volcanoes**

*Allan arrived at school talking about the Icelandic volcano. He talked about what he'd seen on the news, that people can't get home from holiday and there's lots of ash to stop aeroplanes from flying.* (child-initiated)

*We went to the school library to look for some books about them. Allan and his friends were fascinated by these and regularly revisited the book corner.* (adult-led support to develop the interest)

*I provided flour, salt and food colouring and we made lots of salt dough and sculpted it into a volcano. This was very popular with all the children, and we all helped to make it. We then added bicarbonate of soda, vinegar and food colouring to make it erupt, which was exciting for the entire group!* (adult-led focussed activity)

*Allan took this further himself by making models of volcanoes with Lego and in the sand and drawing pictures of them.* (child-initiated, Allan takes the experiences and develops them further)

So what influence did this have on Allan's learning and development?

Allan's teacher had recognised that he was struggling to keep up with his peers and was among the lowest achievers in his class. However, as a consequence of enabling Allan to lead his learning and follow his interests he became more engaged in wider learning opportunities and his confidence grew. Allan's teacher noted the following,

*He has progressed well in his knowledge and understanding of the world and his physical development, and has begun to make progress in communication, language and literacy and problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy; areas that he was very weak at before. I believe that following his interests has played a part in this as he now chooses to access a wider variety of activities, including writing.*

It was also very interesting to note that Allan's behaviour improved considerably as he became the catalyst for a group of children where collaborative play and sustained shared thinking was evident.

**Enabling Allan to lead his learning and follow his interests he became more engaged in wider learning opportunities and his confidence grew**





# 6. The continuum of play

The observations of Allan and his child-led play clearly show the interplay between his (and his friends') ideas and thinking and those of his teacher. It is these connections and the subtle move from one to the other that demonstrate how the aspects of child-initiated play and adult-led activities can be woven together and result in high quality learning and teaching.

If we unpick this further we can see where the balance is between child-initiated play and adult-led focussed activities, planned activities and why we need to ensure that this balance happens. *Learning, Playing and Interacting* (2009) expresses this in the form of a continuum, which is a helpful visual construct.

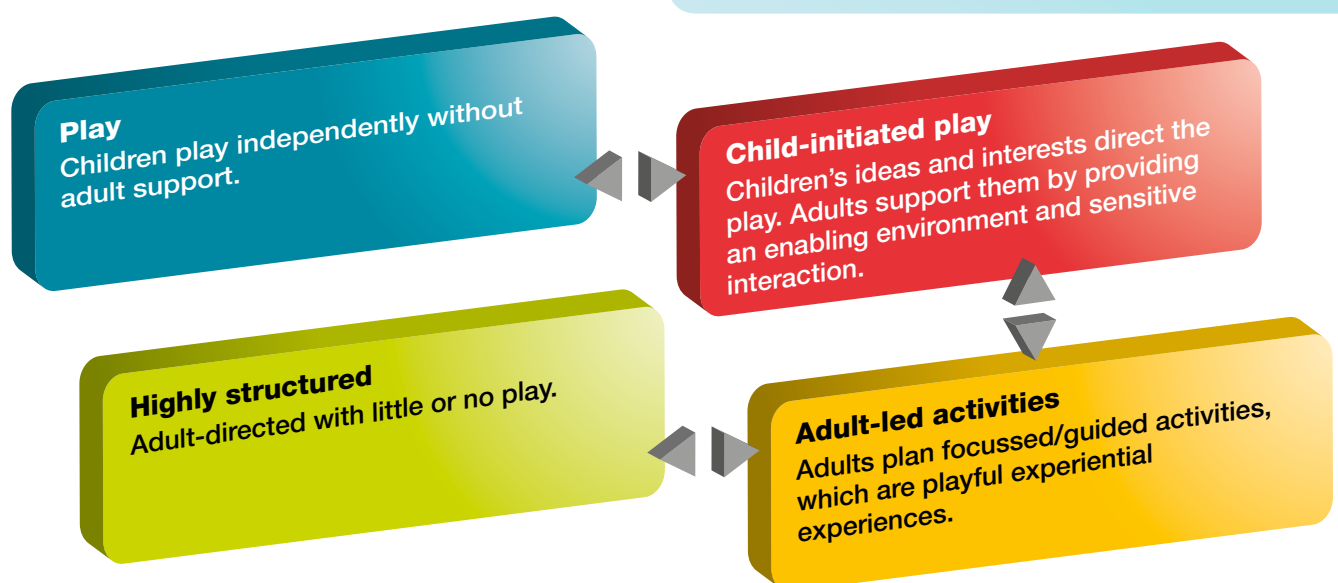
**There is a point when children need to be supported by an adult to extend their thinking and learning**



## Reflective task 4

It is helpful to consider what highly structured, adult-directed planning and activities mean and might look like in your nursery or reception class. Reflect on your planning for next week or next term and consider the following questions:

- How much of what you have planned would you describe as 'highly structured'?
- How does this 'balance' across the continuum?
- What can you change to create a more appropriate balance which matches the needs of the children?
- How will you discuss this with the foundation stage team and the leadership team?



Adapted from *Learning, Playing and Interacting*, 2009, DCSF, p5.

If we think of play as a continuum this helps to frame the discussion around the differing and often conflicting views of the value of play in children's learning and development.

## From play to child-initiated play

At one end we see play as completely open, with children playing independently with no interruptions or support from an adult. This type of play is part of children's natural compulsion and inner drive to explore and make sense of the world and the people around them. It is valuable in enabling children to experiment, try things out and find new ways of doing things as well as being central to building children's confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing. It is also the route by which children begin to build and develop friendships, learning how to understand others and make relationships and collaborate together.

Play of this nature can be described as a form of 'information gathering' where young children seek out, test and explore the objects and experiences they encounter. To adults this can often seem to be aimless and rambling as they move from one thing to another, changing course as something distracts them or they decide on a new path. In technical terms it can be described as 'ludic play' (Hutt, C and J in Lindon, 2001 p.42) where children are engaged in the work of finding out what they can do with objects and materials around them:

*Thus object play is a powerful medium for learning because children are actively experimenting with their own understandings about how objects behave through learning. Through enquiry children are able to personalise their learning to their own particular interests and understandings; the laboratory of 'play' allows for conditions that do not pertain in everyday life, triggering the surprising outcomes that require the child to develop new ways of thinking.*

Evangelo. M. et al, 2009, p.57



Play like this forms the bedrock of children's development and as such is crucial for them to have access to on a regular basis both at home and school. We can learn a great deal from it about children, their development, preferred ways and styles of learning and their interests by observing this play and listening to them. We can find our starting points with them and plan for good supportive and developmental teaching. This is where we need to join them on their pathway, going in the same direction, offering support and guidance.

However, without this support, guidance and interest from the adults around them (including parents) this play may plateau and 'stall' and children will lose interest and momentum in their development and learning. The *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (REPEY, 2002) research clearly identified that there is a point when children need to be supported by an adult to extend their thinking and learning. This is not a new concept, by any means, as it relates directly to Bruner's theories of scaffolding children's learning and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development where children should be supported to make the 'leap' from where their thinking currently exists (their actual level of development) and go beyond this to achieve their potential (proximal development) or new levels of thinking and learning.



## The teacher was building on what the children already knew and can do, scaffolding their learning and supporting them to move from their actual development to new levels of understanding

### Adult-led activities

Adult-led activities are those which have been planned by adults but they also include those which are made in response to children's interests, as we saw with Allan and his teacher. In this case the teacher knew the children well, had a good relationship with them and an understanding of their development and was weaving their teaching into the children's on-going needs and interests. The teacher was building on what the children already knew and can do, scaffolding their learning and supporting them to move from their actual development to new levels of understanding. The REPEY (2002) research has strengthened this approach to supporting children's thinking and learning with robust evidence of how the interplay between teacher and child/ children can lead to deeper levels of learning:

*Our observations show that 'sustained shared thinking' was most likely to occur when children were interacting 1:1 with an adult or with a single peer partner. Freely chosen play activities often provide the best opportunities for adults to extend children's thinking. It may be that extending child-initiated play, coupled with the provision of teacher initiated group work, are the main vehicles for learning.*

REPEY, 2002, p.12



### The highly structured approach

At the other end of the continuum is a view of play which is highly structured. As we have seen from the explanation of the terminology, this cannot be considered play. It is adult/teacher directed and takes on a much more controlled and overtly structured approach to children's learning and development. An approach like this is predominantly led by an overuse of learning outcomes, with few or no opportunities for children to use their own initiative or express their own ideas or thoughts. Planning can become littered with abbreviated and numbered outcomes resulting in a disconnection between pedagogy, good practice and the children.

A highly structured approach in the early years (birth-seven) does not foster or support the self-regulation or growth mind-sets that we know are required for children to become motivated, independent and innovative thinkers and learners for the present and the future. Interestingly, this type of approach will give the appearance of raised levels of progress as children are in effect 'hot housed' to reach adult set goals and targets. Children will in most cases remember and repeat what they are taught but have very little understanding or mastery over the concepts embedded within it; they will have a surface level of understanding but will not be truly confident or competent when they come across the learning again or when they want to make connections to other aspects of their learning. In some cases we can see how this type of teaching has led to children having a dislike of reading and writing and learning in general, and worryingly high levels of stress (House. R 2011, REPEY, 2002, p 29-30).

## Play and sustained shared thinking

Sustained shared thinking occurs most often when the child or children have initiated and led an activity and the teacher has responded to this by using the children's interests to shape the planning and the curriculum. This includes the planning of focussed activities and guided teaching, for example, through storytelling, using a phonics session to extend the 'pirate language' the children have already created, or finding a film on the internet of outer space to show the children what stars look like on closer inspection. Sustained shared thinking also happens with clusters of children and not just on an individual basis and it can occur without an adult as we have seen in the case study of Allan and the garage play.

## Sustained shared thinking in action, Allan's story

We have seen sustained shared thinking happening in action as Allan and his friends played together in the garage. They had created a 'ramp' using the planks and hollow blocks which then formed the 'pit' for inspecting underneath the car. Through a shared discussion they decided that the car needed to go up on the ramp and they set about doing this working as a team, giving each other directions and advice, 'back, back, stop, stop', one child pushing the car and two children checking the sides and Allan in overall charge. They then struck a problem as the car started to wobble on the ramp. Thinking together they worked out that the planks needed to be closer, 'it needs to be closer together'. The children were bouncing their ideas and thoughts off each other in a wonderful example of joint problem-solving (sustained shared thinking).

A little later Allan threw in another challenge, 'there's not enough clearance for that car' and through on-going discussion and active participation they shared their solutions and came up with another idea, 'we need to wheel-spin it on the ramp', which they did together.

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**Sustained shared thinking occurs most often when the child or children have initiated and led an activity**





# 7. The vital role of the teacher

**What is important in sustained shared thinking is the ‘construction’ of the learning and teaching together, where the teacher responds to the child’s/children’s ideas and interests and builds on them rather like a game of table tennis.**

This is how Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards *et al*, 1998) explained the weaving together of children’s learning with adults teaching. He used the metaphor of a table tennis game, where a child may bat an idea/interest to the adult; the adult has to ‘catch’ the ball and bat it back showing interest and acknowledging the idea/thought; the child/children then bat it back and the teacher receives it again, returning it with a bit more challenge this time by building on their thinking and trying to extend it. The crucial thing here is not to bat the ball back with little or no challenge or, worse still, indifference. If the teaching is good the adult will be able to keep the ball in play with the child/children and the thinking and learning will move to a much deeper level. In effect this is where children will reach levels of sustained shared thinking, which we know from the research, is where most learning takes place.

Good adult-led teaching is enhanced by using a playful approach (Broadhead, 2010, Wood & Attfield, 1996, DCSF, 2009, 2010), which, amongst other things, means that teachers have observed the children in their play and used their evaluations to plan activities which extend the children’s thinking. Allan’s teacher did this when he tuned to his interest in volcanoes by providing books and materials and in the process sparked a flurry of interest in the other children.

## Adult intervention in children’s play

Playful teaching also means knowing when and how to intervene in children’s play. The following examples illustrate what happens when intervention goes well and when it doesn’t.



### Reflective questions to consider

Think about Malaguzzi’s metaphor and how it relates to sustained shared thinking. Taking a recent example/observation of children’s play consider the following:

- Could you see clearly the way in which the children/adult were constructing the play together by bouncing the ball to each other?
- What talk, ideas, questions were raised as the play developed?
- How could you support and extend the play through ‘batting the ball’ appropriately?
- How would you share this with your colleagues and show them the thinking and learning involved?



### Scenario 1

A group of boys are playing outside, experiencing the windy weather and becoming very excited. They chase around shouting 'let's catch the wind', 'the wind is running away' and 'I've got it in my hands'. The teacher comes along and tells the boys to calm down and be quiet and warns them that they are going inside as it is too cold. The children continue to play but have moved further away from the teacher and have become quieter and a little secretive in their play. After a few minutes the teacher takes the children inside and says that the weather is too cold and they need to keep warm.

### Scenario 2

A group of boys are playing outside, experiencing the windy weather and becoming very excited. They chase around shouting 'let's catch the wind', 'the wind is running away' and 'I've got it in my hands'. The teacher is watching the children and observing their play in the wind; she takes some photographs and quickly writes down what they have said. She notices that the boys become increasingly frustrated by their attempts to 'catch the wind' so she chooses the right moment and goes to join the group. She says, 'I am trying to catch the wind as well and it keeps getting away'. The boys reply 'We can't catch it either and we have really tried, it keeps slipping through our fingers'. The teacher looks puzzled and says 'I wonder what we can do to catch the wind?'

The boys come up with a range of ideas and solutions, all of which the teacher tries out with them (she also records their attempts/experiments by taking photographs). Eventually they find that the carrier bags the teacher brought out work really well especially if they tie a piece of string to the handles so that the bag becomes a kite. The children and the teacher run around the garden together catching the wind. The next day the teacher asks the boys if they want to make a story about their attempts to catch the wind using power point to insert the photographs and speech bubbles to show what they had said. The story is shared with the other children on the whiteboard and leads on to a focus on the wind, hurricanes and tornados.

Teaching playfully is a pedagogical skill which those working with young children need to fully understand and feel secure with. It requires the confidence of the teacher to let the children lead and to present focussed, planned activities in exciting, child-centred ways, as we saw within the example above.

Are there opportunities in your planning this week to teach playfully?

- Can you join in with children's play in the home corner, or the imaginative area you have created with the children (the bear's cave or the monster's house) and take a part, following the children's lead, and participate alongside the play? Think about the table tennis game.
- Can you keep an open mind about the child's/ children's play and listen to their ideas before

adding your own? Avoid question 'domination.' It's the children who should be asking the questions not the teacher.

- Can you build on children's observed interests in teaching, playfully, a phonics session?
- Can you set up a cooking activity playfully, where all the children in the group have their own bowls and utensils as well as you? Are there songs and playful counting activities you can use?

The above examples are a rich source of thinking and learning for both the children and the teacher. It is in this kind of playful activity that you can really find out where the children are in their learning. The bonus is that if you observe and listen to children as you do this, you will find out much more about their development than you would by using an overly structured activity with narrow learning outcomes and a tick sheet.



# 8. Observing complex thinking and learning

**In order to understand how child-led play and learning can lead to deeper levels of thinking and learning it is important to look at what this means in much more detail.**

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This also helps to validate why play of this nature is central to young children's development and potential and,

*enables children to work with confidence, persevering for long periods of time and working at levels far higher than those sometimes identified in the planned curriculum. Child-initiated experiences allow children increased ownership and responsibility.*  
Moyles. J in Featherstone. S & P (Eds) et al, 2008, p.33

Moyles also points out that research into child-led role play showed that children had 'significantly more cognitive behaviours associated with thinking, knowing and remembering' and raised levels of persistence, thinking behaviours and a strong feeling of satisfaction and wellbeing. In effect, their growth mindset and self-regulation was strongly present. A collaborative action research project (Chilvers, 2010 unpublished), with a group of practitioners in a local authority (LA) in Yorks and Humber, looked at what happened to children's thinking and learning when teachers/practitioners followed children's interests and found exactly the same results (see page 22).

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**Child-initiated experiences allow children increased ownership and responsibility**



### Active learners

Children became much more active and in control of their own thinking and learning, which was evidenced by:

- increased levels of engagement (in terms of the involvement scales)
- being motivated, excited and confident to take on new challenges
- being empowered to pose their own problems and involve others
- being visibly and intrinsically excited and enthusiastic
- increased involvement in imaginative play.

### Confidence

Children's confidence made a significant leap and was evidenced in their play, relationships and activities. They were:

- self assured
- confident to try things out
- persistent (had 'stick-ability'), concentrating and 'persisting with difficulty' for longer periods of time
- confident with other children and adults, especially those children who were learning English as an additional language.

### Self-esteem

Children's self-esteem grew and was evidenced in their records of progress, they had:

- increased belief in themselves as instigators of ideas and as 'experts' who could share this with others
- enthusiasm and zest
- the confidence and drive to take on new challenges.

### Social skills

There was unanimous agreement that children's social skills had developed. There was a significant increase in collaboration with other children and, particularly in imaginative play, an 'automatic' attraction of others to their friends' interest and a will to share ideas and thinking.

### Language development

The LA had been following the Every Child a Talker programme for nearly two years and found an important link between following children's interests and their conversational language. There is strong evidence that following children's ideas and interests:

- increased children's talk and interactions
- improved attention and listening skills
- stimulated much more imaginative talk
- supported significant progress for children learning English as an additional language.

### Behaviour

Children's behaviour improved significantly and changed in the following ways:

- collaborative play increased, children cooperated with each other and were more inclusive
- children were less likely to 'hit-out' (a comment from one of the practitioners).

Children's involvement in leading their own play experiences reveals a treasure box of learning and development and shows them to be much more capable and competent thinkers and learners than we give them credit for. Too detailed and uninspired planning can unintentionally 'dumb down' our expectations of children by putting a 'lid' on their

potential. In contrast, if we keep an open mind and understand the complex nature of their learning we will achieve far more. It's important to know what lies underneath the actions of child-led experiences.



## Unpicking child-led experiences

Examining what lies beneath child-led thinking and learning







From the diagram we can see how following child-led experiences leads to opportunities for complex thinking and learning in the following ways:

### Co-construction of thinking and scaffolding children's learning

This is about building children's thinking and will, if supported by the teacher, lead to 'the development of higher order structures of the mind' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Rinaldi (2006) describes this as a 'knowledge building process' which is best undertaken with others collaboratively and is concerned with children constantly re-building their understandings in the light of new experiences and ideas.

When children do this thinking, learning becomes more involved and at a deeper level. It directly involves meta-cognitive processes. We can support this in practice by following children's interests, giving them time to develop and build on their ideas with few interruptions and watching the mistakes children make as learning opportunities.

### More opportunities for sustained shared thinking

This will lead to 'joint problem-solving' experiences (Wood & Attfield, 2005) and the sharing of thinking. It directly relates to the co-construction of thinking as one leads to the other and vice versa. *Creativity and critical thinking emerge as a result of the dynamic interplay between teacher and child*, DCSF, 2010, p.13.

We can support this in practice by making sure that there are many opportunities for children to engage in shared/joint conversations with other children and adults as they provide rich opportunities for them to become immersed in their ideas, fascinations and interests and employing careful observation of children's thinking and documenting this as a process rather than an end product.

### An increase in children's thinking but particularly meta-cognition

Meta-cognition can be explained as '*thinking about thinking*' (Robson, 2006, p.82), '*knowing what to do when you don't know what to do*' (Claxton, 1999) and '*spontaneous wonderings*' (Donaldson, 1992), all wonderfully imaginative terms to describe children's (and adults') thinking. It is how children become aware of themselves as thinkers and how they reflect on their thinking, but in order to do this they have to have their thinking and ideas acknowledged by the people around them.

Siraj-Blatchford (2007) has shown that it is at the heart of children's learning and is a process that significantly contributes to their belief in themselves as learners and the thinking dispositions they need for learning to learn. We can support this in practice by being aware of children's thinking and letting them talk about their ideas/thoughts; giving them time to wonder, ponder, think and reflect; enabling children to become involved in defining a problem and looking for solutions and working together, collaboratively as a 'community of learners.'

### The development of possibility thinking and a growth mindset

The DCSF (2010) identified possibility thinking as part of children finding and solving problems with both the child and the adult asking 'possibility questions' to deepen their thinking. The kind of possibility questions are of a high quality and don't have a straight forward 'right or wrong' answer, they are open and speculative, requiring thought and reflection (meta-cognition). Examples would be, 'What does it remind you of?', 'What do you think might happen next?' and 'I don't know, what



do you think?’ These are the kind of questions that acknowledge children as thinkers and do not disempower them or undermine their responses. They lead to children not being afraid of getting it wrong, which is an important learning skill.

### **The development of ‘mastery’, cognitive self-regulation and persistence**

Cognitive self-regulation is about children taking control of their own learning, with the supportive help of an adult, who can scaffold their learning and move them from the unknown to the known. Through this children begin to have ‘mastery’ over their learning, which means that they truly understand what they have learned (or what you have taught) and are confident to use this again in other situations. We can support this in practice by involving children in their own planning; giving them the freedom to combine resources which means having good continuous provision (inside and outside) and open-ended materials and creating environments for creative thinking with frequent and sustained opportunities to develop their ideas over a period of time.

### **Deeper levels of involvement, engagement and the ‘flow’ of thinking**

Involvement is characterised by children concentrating for long periods at a time and becoming completely absorbed in their experiences. This is how involvement relates to the concept of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) where children have an intrinsic feeling of getting ‘lost’ in something and losing track of time or wanting to repeat the experience even if it is challenging. It is at moments like this that children’s thinking and learning move into another dimension and become more meaningful, eventually leading to higher levels of ‘mastery’ and understanding. Laevers (2005) describes involvement as ‘intense mental activity’ which progresses into deeper levels of learning. It is no coincidence that children become more involved and focussed when they are following their own ideas and interests:

*When children are in their element, they become active protagonists in their own learning, building confidence in themselves as learners and creative thinkers. This in turn strengthens their resilience and their ability in themselves as learners and creative thinkers. DCSF, 2010, p.11*

We can support this in practice by making sure that children have uninterrupted time, without constant distractions, to become absorbed and persist at what they are doing either by themselves or collaboratively. If children are in a ‘stop-start’ environment where the day is broken up into short chunks, they will quickly realise that there is little point in investing any time in becoming involved as they will be redirected to other activities which the teacher deems more important. This is about getting the balance right between adult-directed activities and child-led experiences and thinking more creatively about how the day can be structured to give children more autonomy and time.

### **The recognition of the child’s voice and making their ideas and interests visible**

Child-led experiences enable children to voice their thinking, express their ideas and have a part to play in their own learning. They are not passive beings waiting to be taught but active and social participants in their own learning, which we can see very well when they are ‘allowed’ to contribute their own ideas. Their ideas, which are often far more interesting than an adult’s, can contribute significantly to planning and lead to a richer more relevant experience.



We can support this in practice by ‘listening’ to children’s ideas, thinking and conversations; by asking children about the planning and doing it with them and ensuring that there is a sensible balance between teacher-led planning and child-led experiences. The ‘balance’ is the way in which these two aspects are woven together and isn’t clear cut. For example, leaving child-led play to a Friday afternoon is not a balance and clearly expresses the view that children’s ideas are not valued and can only be experienced when everything else, which by default is more important, has been done. The ‘balance’ is not about allowing child-led experiences to be undertaken when children have finished their ‘work’ or as a reward when they have been good. All these perspectives of ‘balance’ do is reinforce the view that what children think and do is not as important as what the adults do and think. If this is the case then self-regulation, growth mindsets and all the other aspects above, will not happen.

The ‘balance’ is about the interplay and meshing together of experiences and activities across the day and the week in the same way as we saw in the case study of Allan and his teacher. Another brief example would be where a teacher has planned to support the children’s interest in Dr Who by reading stories about time travel and outer space, then letting the children build the Tardis out of cardboard boxes where they have to negotiate and plan the design with each other and allocate jobs. The teacher keeps checking that they have everything they need and that it is progressing well by observing them every now and then and taking some pictures. Later on they all come together with the teacher and talk about what they have done including how they made sure the boxes were joined together and that the Tardis was big enough for them all. The teacher made some notes with the children about what they had learned together and added some thoughts for the next day.

This documentation of the process is crucial to making sure that the thinking and learning which has taken place, as the children have discussed and negotiated with each other, is recorded in some way. Photographs are the easiest way to record children’s ideas and thinking but we also need to record their voices, which means noting down what they have said from time to time. This will tell us a great deal about their thinking, learning and progress.

Documentation is a process of gathering together pieces of evidence (observations, photographs, talk, drawings, models etc) of a child/children’s interest and thinking as it develops over a period of time and using it to interpret the child/children’s thinking and learning. Rather like a jigsaw puzzle, as the pieces come together you begin to see the whole picture. It will tell you much more about children’s learning and progress than a tick sheet or list and is more about the quality of the evidence rather than the quantity.

We can support this in practice by viewing child-led experiences and interests as an on-going ‘story’ or narrative of their thinking and learning; by listening to children and observing them in an intentional way which is more in-depth rather than collecting random evidence of a variety of activities; and including the child’s voice in the documentation by doing it with them and using it at a later point to reflect on together.

### The development of imaginative and symbolic play

Child-led play leads to children becoming much more engaged in imaginative and symbolic play as they develop their ideas and negotiate roles, which we saw happening in Allan’s garage play with his friends.

Opportunities for imaginative play seem to be quite limited especially in schools where it can be relegated to a poorly resourced home corner or only undertaken at playtime.



In child-led play the instinct is to play imaginatively and collaboratively with others, with very good reason, one of them being that this type of play supports the development of symbolic thinking, which underpins the child's dispositions and skills for reading, writing and numbers. As children lead the play and become involved in developing imaginative scenarios they are making the connection between actions and thinking in the here and now, which are tangible (concrete), to those that are abstract and intangible (symbolic like numbers and letters).

Symbolic thinking is absolutely vital. For example, it enables children to make the leap from physically seeing six solid objects (concrete) and counting them out in a row to knowing that the number we call six is actually written like this, '6' (abstract and symbolic). The symbols we use for reading, writing and numbers are all abstract squiggles to young children who have to come to understand that we attach a meaning to them of great significance. If children are able to imagine that a cardboard box (something concrete in the here and now) can symbolise and become a rocket or a castle, that is, an arbitrary open-ended object can stand for something that is abstract and symbolic, then they are more able to make the connection that the letters: c, a, t stand for cat.

This is quite a simplified version of the complex development of children's thinking; however, the implications for children in building their phonological awareness as well as understanding and enjoying reading, writing and mathematics are considerable. They need to be able and confident about making this subtle but crucial shift in thinking. We can support this by enabling children to follow their own ideas and have opportunities to play with them imaginatively both indoors and outdoors. This doesn't require a vast amount of equipment as more open-ended materials like blankets, tarpaulins, cardboard boxes and pegs are ideal. What they do require is the time and opportunity to do this with a playful adult supporting them and looking for ways to teach skills etc through their play.



### Reflective task 5

Having looked in detail at what lies underneath the actions of child-led experiences and how this relates to good early years practice think about your own knowledge and practice. Take some time to stand back and observe your environment (indoors and outdoors) and observe what the children and adults are doing. Can you recognise the aspects above and see this happening in practice? You may want to use these aspects in a self-evaluation process with your early years team. This will help you to identify what is happening and what needs to happen so that you can action plan for future development.

### Child-led play leads to children becoming much more engaged in imaginative and symbolic play as they develop their ideas and negotiate roles





# 9. Thinking about the challenges

**Following a child-led philosophy, as we have seen, is not an easy option, it is a complex, sophisticated process and it has its challenges. However, the benefits to children's development and progress mean that it is a good long-term investment which may only reveal its gains at the end of KS1 and more likely at the end of KS2 (EPPE, 2003-08 and EPPSE, 2007-11).**

*'It is important to take a long-term view. Preparing children only for the short-term, whether this is the next test or the next stage in their education is short sighted.'*

Duffy, 1998, p.13

There are going to be questions and challenges; universal dilemmas which need to be unpicked, discussed and reflected upon to shape excellent practice and support children as competent and capable thinkers and learners. By adopting a positive view of the challenges, that face early years teachers, we can be sure that the responses we give are grounded in the evidence from research and supported by the wealth of knowledge on child development and how children learn.



## Challenges faced in the foundation years

### Lack of training in play

Some teachers have not been early years trained so do not have knowledge of child development or an understanding of the value of learning through play and how to support and extend children's learning.

### Explanation and possible solutions

Having a good knowledge and understanding of young children's development and learning is fundamental to ensuring that the way we teach them 'hooks' into their starting points – moving in the same direction (REPEY, 2002). In the foundation years children will enter reception classes at vastly different ages (young four year olds to mature five year olds) at a time when their development is at its most diverse, for example, you may have a four year old, summer-born boy, who was eight weeks premature starting at the same time as a September born girl; this will require very specific teaching and support based on the very different starting points these children have on entering school.

Understanding the complex nature of play will take time, it is rather like the tip of an iceberg, what you can see is only a small part of the philosophy. Keeping an open mind is helpful as well as trusting in the children's innate desire to play.







### Solutions:

- Observe children as much as you can and discuss what you see with other colleagues. This is one of the best ways to learn about children's development and the value of play.
- Refer to books and reading to develop your knowledge and understanding.
- Identify some CPD which focuses on observation, child development and play. Build your knowledge gradually by talking with others and keeping an open mind.
- Schools which have a nursery will have staff who are more familiar with early years practice. Work together and learn from each other.

### Reflecting on theory and practice

The following questions are helpful in terms of focussing your thinking with the wider team and senior management.

- How often do you observe children and discuss what you see with other colleagues or the parents?
- Are teachers' specialisms, knowledge and skills well used or does the school operate a rotating class system each year?
- How will this support your understanding of children's development, learning and the role of play?
- How prepared are you for very young children entering the reception class? Is the environment supportive of their development and is the curriculum/planning responsive to their varying needs?
- What are the views of child-led play in your school? How are its values shared and communicated with other staff and with families?
- How is good practice developed across the nursery and reception classes, particularly around play and observation? Is expertise and knowledge recognised and shared?



## Observe children as much as you can and discuss what you see with other colleagues

### Poor adult:child ratios

The most beneficial learning through play requires practitioners to be able to observe and judge when to participate and extend children's thinking and learning. This is very difficult in classes when the adult:child ratio is very poor compared to pre-school settings.

### Explanation and possible solutions

The way in which teachers observe, intervene and participate in children's play, in order to support their thinking and learning, is quite a skill, especially in a busy classroom, but as we have seen it is one of the key ways in which children's thinking can be furthered. It is how the learning is constructed by you and the children, and leads to sustained shared thinking. We have seen the evidence of the underpinning theoretical constructs to child-led learning and this doesn't stop as they enter KS1. If it is followed and extended children will build on their current thinking and take it to new levels. Some choices need to be made here to enable this to happen.

### Solutions:

- If children are more independent and less reliant on you, in other words they are good self-regulators, they can get on and become absorbed in their own experiences, working independently or collaboratively. This requires you to trust that they can lead their own learning and can get on with it. To do this they need good continuous provision, uninterrupted time and the knowledge that at some point they can share their thinking with you. This leaves you with time to observe what children are involved in, make a decision as to whether to intervene and at the same time record what the children are doing and saying by using a camera and notebook.

## Start with a small group of children and develop it as an action research/practitioner research process (as in the LA example)

- Where teachers plan themselves into everything this leaves little time for flexibility and participation in children's play experiences. It is important to leave spaces across the day and week where you are able to participate in child-led experiences to support the children, record what they are doing and saying and to use this in other aspects of the planning, eg the photographs you have taken could be used as a story, with key words added and an opportunity to talk together and reflect on what they have done (a meta-cognitive activity which is adult-led).

### Reflecting on theory and practice

The following questions are helpful in terms of focussing your thinking with the wider team and senior management.

- Does the environment, including the timing of the day, support children in being autonomous and independent, eg is there continuous provision with everything they may need?
- Can you see children using self-regulation skills, eg deciding what to do next, who to play with and what to play, choosing when to have a snack?
- How often do you leave some space for yourself in your planning so that you can step back and watch what children are doing and saying?
- How do other staff support children's developing independence and autonomy? Are they also observing and recording what the children are doing?
- Is it possible to involve parents and students in observing children and supporting them when they need help?

### Large classes

How can I support child-led experiences and follow children's interests when there are 30 in the class?

#### Explanation and possible solutions

The evidence for supporting child-led experiences is substantial and the impact it has on children's thinking and learning. However, teachers need to feel confident about handing over some of the control to the children and letting them do the planning. It would not be sensible to do this in one go with 30 children as it needs to be introduced gently so that the whole philosophy is well embedded and everyone understands why you are letting the children's interests lead the way. This includes informing parents. One of the most positive ways to begin is through a small practitioner research project in your class/school, where you start with a small group of children and build from there.

#### Solutions:

- Start with a small group of children and develop it as an action research/practitioner research process (as in the LA example). Fortunately, children's interests and ideas tend to cluster together so that you are following a group of, sometimes, up to six children. Allan's interest involved up to four other children so the observations, photographs and documentation was relevant to five children, although there would be different evaluations for each child. In a class of 30 you could have up to six collaborative group interests to follow, though you may have less. It all depends on the children and the way their interests develop.
- It is important that we see children individually; there will be 30 children with their own ideas etc but we also need them to learn how to play with each other in a collaborative way in their own learning communities. We can only do this if interests are shared.



- With good continuous provision and a flexible use of your time children will be able to work at their own pace, either individually or collaboratively, and make choices and decisions about what to do next. This will all support the development of self-regulation skills.
- Child-led interests will also form part of your planning but mainly by documenting, in retrospect, what happened. The nature of following interests means that as soon as you plan some aspect it has actually become adult-led. This means that your planning will need to be flexible and responsive to the children. You will have on-going continuous provision which is enhanced (planned), there will be planning for yourself and adult focussed activities (in response to interests and incorporating support for language and literacy) and there will be the retrospective planning from what the children have undertaken by following their interests. If you build in time for them to reflect on this it will form part of your retrospective planning and inform what will happen next. As an additional bonus you will also be able to identify the learning that has occurred and what progress the children have made.
- How do you plan for yourself and other staff? Is this mainly focussed on adult-directed planned activities? How can you create more of a balance which weaves together adult-led activities and child-led experiences in a similar way to the examples in this publication?

## Pressure for results

It can be difficult to reconcile the pressure for 'results' (from above and from parents) with the wish to allow children to pursue self-initiated learning.

### Explanation and possible solutions

Looking back at 'understanding the connections between play, thinking and learning' we can see how an initial 'push' in the foundation years can induce better outcomes, but at what cost? The evidence is clear that a child-led approach which involves sustained shared thinking will, in the long-term, have much more impact on children's learning and progress (REPEY, 2002, EPPE, 2003-08, EPPSE, 2007-13) but this may not be completely evident at the end of KS1. This requires a school to be familiar with the research evidence and theories of children's learning and to ensure that the transition of children's learning from one KS to another is consistent and builds on previous learning without any loss of momentum.

It also depends on what you are using to evidence the child's learning and progress. If we are looking for superficial evidence of learning like colours, numbers and shapes then we miss the child's potential for deeper thinking which involves them concentrating, being involved, possibility thinking, meta-cognition etc. If this is the case we may be producing 'results' which have 'dumbed down' the real potential of children. In short, it depends on what results you are looking for - superficial outcomes or deeper levels of thinking and learning?

## Reflecting on theory and practice

The following questions are helpful in terms of focussing your thinking with the wider team and senior management.

- Do children already bring their interests with them to school? Do you talk with them about super heroes or the local football match? Could this be a starting point for some practitioner research?
- Have you discussed/shared the impact of research and theory on child-led experiences with the foundation stage team, the senior management group, the KS1 coordinator, the headteacher?
- Is your planning overly structured? Does it give time and space across the day and week to adopt a flexible approach to support children's interests?



### Solutions:

- A practitioner action research project with a small group of children should include how you are going to assess the children's progress eg observations, development matters, FSP. This will provide evidence of children's potential and you will probably be surprised at what children can actually do when the 'lid' is lifted off their learning.
- Make sure that you are assessing children in terms of their engagement and involvement (Laevers, 2005), levels of concentration, thinking, mindset and self-regulation. If you are not sure what this may look like keep observing the children in their child-led experiences and you will begin to recognise it.
- Your observations will be a mine of information for assessment. After a period of about six weeks bring your observations together along with any photographs, notes from home, pictures, writing etc. and start to unpick what you can see happening. Can you see evidence of involvement, is there evidence of sustained shared thinking, are they motivated to move from one activity to another in a self-regulated way?

### Reflecting on theory and practice

The following questions are helpful in terms of focussing your thinking with the wider team and senior management.

- Reflecting on what you have read in this publication can you make a case from the evidence for child-led learning? What do you think are the main arguments to support following children's interests and what is the opposing view?
- What are you looking for when you assess children's progress? Are you recognising everything that the child can do?



### Finding time

I have to fit in hall time, PE, phonics groups, outdoor play, snack time/playtime and group time into the day so how do I fit in time to follow children's interests?

#### Explanation and possible solutions

We know that young children need time to become engrossed in their experiences and activities in order to reach deeper levels of concentration and involvement (remembering that is when most sustained and shared thinking occurs). If they are experiencing a 'stop-start' day, where they are constantly interrupted then this will not foster the dispositions and skills of persistence, commitment and concentration, to name a few. As far as possible, children need uninterrupted time to really focus. The more they are interrupted the less likely they are to become absorbed and engaged. Giving children more opportunities to follow through their ideas and activities will support the development of self-regulation and ensure that they continue to work on something until it is finished.

#### Solutions:

- Look for ways to keep interruptions to a minimum, eg an independent snack area where children can decide when to have a drink, combining outdoor play with PE and integrating phonics into the flow of the day.
- Allow children some flexibility if they are deeply involved in something. Dragging them away from this may be a missed learning opportunity and they are unlikely to give you their full attention if they are still thinking about the activity they were doing.
- Encourage and model good self-regulation skills by making sure that what has been started is finished; this may mean coming back to it over a period of days.



## Allow children some flexibility if they are deeply involved in something

### Reflecting on theory and practice

The following questions are helpful in terms of focussing your thinking with the wider team and senior management.

- Thinking about the way in which children's learning and development can be fostered also includes how the environment they are in can support this (or not). Have you observed your environment at various points in the day to find out when children are most absorbed and engaged?
- Have you talked to the children about how they feel when they are interrupted?
- Do you think that the 'control' the teacher has identifies teacher-led activities as being more important than child-initiated ones? What impact may this have on children's thinking and learning?

### Transition

Early years practitioners and advisers can be reluctant to see transition between the foundation stage and KS1 as a two-way process. Some children need to be working on the national curriculum in YR, just as some need to be continuing with ELGs in year 1.

### Explanation and possible solutions

We talk a great deal about transition in terms of children moving from one KS to another, what we don't focus on is the transition of pedagogy and the curriculum. Transition of the foundation stage into the national curriculum (NC) should be viewed as a two-way process where overlapping themes and principles merge together to make sure that there is no loss of momentum in the children's progress. Just as children entered the foundation stage at developmentally diverse ages, they are doing the same as they enter KS1. It could be that some children have had a year longer in the foundation stage than their friends. This is why there will be an overlap of the EYFS and the NC, however, we need to be sure this is about the children's needs and not the need to rush children along before they are ready in the hope that attainment will increase.

### Solutions:

- Transition of the foundation stage into the NC should be discussed with the management team in order to consider how children's progress can be maintained and built upon in the next stage of their school life.
- Good formative and summative assessment in the foundation stage will ensure that children's starting points in KS1 are identified and planned for. This may mean continuing with the EYFS.
- Opportunities to discuss philosophy and practice (pedagogy) across the KSs with all staff will build up a picture of children's learning history and generate a respect and understanding of each KS.

### Reflecting on theory and practice

The following questions are helpful in terms of focussing your thinking with the wider team and senior management.

- How do you share the early years philosophy with colleagues in other KSs?
- If you look at the 'learnacy' skills such as self-regulation, growth mindsets, concentration and involvement etc these are all transferrable skills that we would want all our children to have, including those in other KSs. How far is this discussed together as a staff team? For example, what would self-regulation look like in KS2?
- How can the momentum be maintained as children progress from the foundation stage to the NC?
- Can children's starting points (current interests) be used to shape the next step as they move into KS1? How would this help them to maintain their momentum?



# 10. Final thoughts

**There is a great deal to think about when we follow a child-led approach. It is not an easy option and requires skilled and confident teachers to understand why it supports children's thinking and learning and how to make it happen in practice.**

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The sophisticated weaving together of children's interests and adults teaching means that we are all travelling in the same direction and using the natural materials that are readily available to us at no extra cost; children's impeccable propensity for finding out, being inquisitive and curious and their imaginative thinking, ideas and fascinations along with teachers' skills in connecting to children and using these abilities, are a strong starting point for good teaching.

We do need to be able to articulate these perspectives with others including headteachers, coordinators, colleagues and families as well as making sure that we educate the next generation of good early years teachers. To do this we need confident and assured teachers; one of the best ways of becoming confident and assured is to understand the pedagogy behind the practice. A starting point for this is to reflect on the questions posed at the beginning of this publication, and throughout, and feel confident to voice the need for child-led experiences, play and playful teaching.

Thinking about the reflective questions and tasks within the publication will be one of the best starting points to either sharpen the thinking you have already undertaken or to begin thinking about how you can extend the quality of teaching and learning you offer to the children in your school. It is far better to do this reflective thinking with your colleagues in the form of a learning community, so that you can collectively reach your own levels

of sustained shared thinking. You may also want to consider how this can be broadened to include the wider school team, parents and, indeed, other schools in your communities. This view of reflecting and learning together is expressed very well by the teachers in Reggio Emilia preschools,

*In our on-going and permanent staff development, we place a great deal of emphasis on promoting constant learning and an attitude of research, an openness to change and to discussing diverse points of view.....being able to reflect on our actions has been crucial to the development of our approach. Revisiting and reflecting on our actions...allows us to step back from ourselves... and increase our awareness of what we are learning and what is possible.*

Project Zero, 2001, p.55



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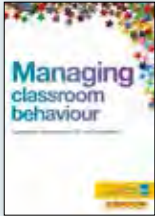
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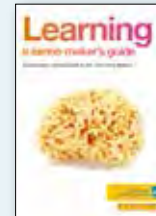
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